



January 16, 2010

Sierra Club supports wild horse round up in Nevada

By *MARTIN GRIFFITH*
Associated Press Writer

RENO (AP) — Two environmental groups are joining ranchers in an unusual coalition supporting the government's contentious removal of about 2,500 wild horses from the range north of Reno.

The Sierra Club and Friends of Nevada Wilderness, which have been at odds with ranchers on past issues, agree with the need for the ongoing roundup of mustangs in the Calico Mountain Complex.

The organizations, in a joint news release with the sportsmen groups Safari Club International and Coalition for Nevada's Wildlife, said an over-population of mustangs is harming native wildlife and the range itself.

Sierra Club spokeswoman Tina Nappe of Reno said a mustang can consume up to 26 pounds of forage a day and arid rangelands can't produce enough food for them.

"They are successful competitors and will consume available vegetation, thereby ensuring the loss of wildlife diversity and populations which also depend on the same plants," she said.

Mustangs have been observed chasing and harassing pronghorn antelope near water sources, the organizations said, and have been identified as a risk factor for critical sage grouse habitat. The bird has been petitioned for protection as an endangered species.

Bighorn sheep and mule deer also compete for food and water with mustangs, the groups said, and their populations are down.

"When horse numbers reach unsustainable levels, the health of our sagebrush community suffers along with our native wildlife," said Shaaron Netherton, executive director of Friends of Nevada Wilderness.

Jeremy Drew, president of the Safari Club's northern Nevada chapter, criticized various celebrities for suggesting the roundup is threatening the Calico herd with extinction. He noted at least 572 horses will be left in the herd.

Sheryl Crow, Willie Nelson, Bill Maher, Lily Tomlin and Ed Harris are among celebrities who have come out against the roundup.

"Much of the hysteria has been based on manipulated or false information," Drew said, adding the groups agree mustangs have a place on public lands in proper numbers.

Wildlife ecologist Craig Downer of Nevada, who unsuccessfully sued to stop the roundup along with California-based In Defense of Animals, disputed the groups' statements.

He said the romantic symbols of the American West don't harm the range because they graze over a wider area, and their scat fertilizes the soil.

"They do not appreciate the wild horse as a returned native and for all the positive benefits that it contributes to an ecosystem," said Downer, who earlier quit the Sierra Club over its stance on the issue.

"Wild horses are being used as scapegoats and targets because they don't suit the interests of those

who want to make it (Calico complex) a hunter's paradise," he added.

Ranchers have complained the horses are hurting the range, native wildlife and livestock because they can double in population every four years.

The two-month Calico roundup began late last month as part of the government's plans to remove as many as 25,000 mustangs from the range and ship them to pastures in the Midwest and East.

The government says the number of wild horses and burros on public lands in the West stands at nearly 37,000, about half of them in Nevada. It believes the number that can be supported on the range is about 26,600.

An additional 34,000 wild horses already live away from the range in federal-run corrals and pastures.
